

# Before & After: A Look at Our Land Land Use History of Jones County, GA

## VOCABULARY

Vocabulary in article indicated in italics

### **Climatology records**

Historical records describing the weather of a region

### **Elevation**

Height; altitude

### **Land Use**

Ways humanity has used the land

### **Natural history**

Historical chain of natural events; development of a natural object

### **Oral history**

History passed down through word of mouth

### **Productivity**

The quality or state of being productive

### **Site**

A place

### **Social history**

History of what people have done, including how people used land

### **Soil Surveys**

Maps depicting soil types throughout a geographic region

### **Soil erosion**

The depletion of soil by water, wind, glacial ice, and human activities

### **Vegetative cover**

Plants which cover the earth

Most scientists use numerical data or information to measure and understand their research. However, not all data are numerical. Some data may be in the form of words and pictures. These data are called **qualitative data**. The scientist in this study used qualitative data to study the history of a particular piece of land.

Qualitative data help social scientists to understand things in more depth than they could understand by using numbers.

## Discovery

Go outside and look at the land surrounding your school. Imagine how the land that makes up your schoolyard could have looked two hundred years ago. Observe the different plant and animal species around the playground. Look at the land itself. Is it hilly, or is it flat? Are there man-made structures surrounding the school, or is it a natural setting? Use your sense of sight, scent, and hearing to observe. Record your findings. What do you think the land looked like 10 years ago? Find 10 ways the land has changed in the past 10 years. Why has it changed? In what ways has the land remained the same?



*Adapted from:*

Edwards, Boyd M. 1983.

Land-use in Jones County, Georgia: An historic perspective. *Georgia Journal of Science*, 41:71-78.

## Introduction

Much of what humans do depends on the land that we live on. As humans have become more technologically and scientifically advanced, we have modified the land in so many ways that sometimes it is hard to imagine what the land used to be like. No matter how much humans change the land, it is still important to understand the history and characteristics of land. If scientists can help us understand how our activities have impacted the land, we can act more carefully in the future to protect the health of the land.

Throughout time, land has transformed in many ways. Many changes occur naturally. The earth is constantly changing by means of volcanoes, earthquakes, and other natural phenomena. Can you name other natural ways the earth changes?

In addition to the natural changes, there are changes that humans have caused. For example, think of different towns and cities that you have seen. Now think of how the land where the cities now stand must have looked two hundred years ago. Chances are the land was cleared of most plants and wildlife. Wildland has been and continues to be cleared for farmland and other human activities.

The relation between humans and land has existed since the beginning of mankind. A scientist named Boyd Edwards is very interested in this topic. He believes that by knowing land's past and present, we can better understand it, and therefore, take better care of it. His belief led to a study in

which Dr. Edwards researched land use, which simply means how humans use land. He studied Jones County, Georgia (Fig. 1). While he focused on different ways people used the land, Dr. Edwards also researched the land itself.

## Methods

To understand what Jones County is like today, Dr. Edwards traced its *natural history* and its *social history* from the past until the present. Much like knowing the history of the United States helps us to understand our country, knowing the history of land helps us to understand how to take care of the land so that it can continue to be healthy into the future.

Dr. Edwards first studied the *natural history* of Jones County. He gathered most of his data from existing sources, such as *soil surveys*, books, and from *climatology records*. Dr. Edwards described the *natural history* in terms of what kind of soils are found in Jones County, the

makeup of its rocks, its *elevation*, its water systems, its normal climate including average temperature and rainfall, and its *vegetative cover*.

Then Dr. Edwards began studying the *social history* of Jones County. The *social history* is the history of how people used and changed the land. The *social history* of Jones County began with the American Indians, the area's first human inhabitants. Much of what we know about the American Indians was first passed down through word of mouth, which is called *oral history*. Therefore, it is difficult for a scientist to find much information on early American Indian life.

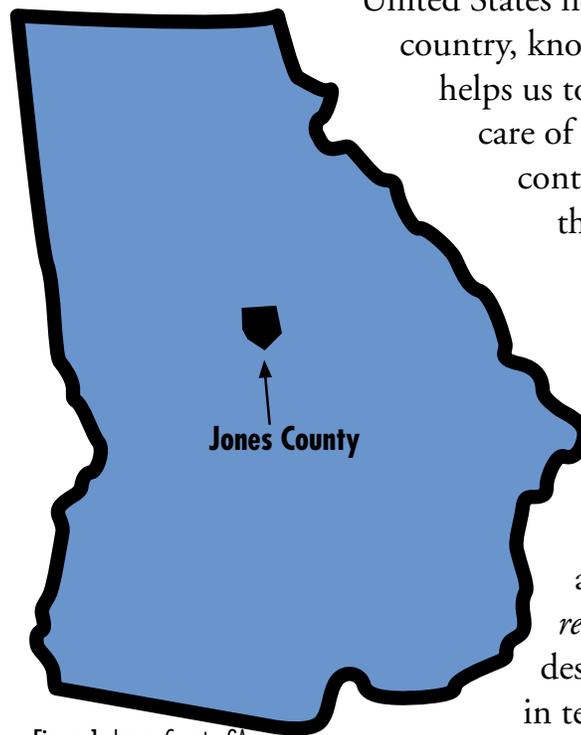


Figure 1. Jones, County, GA

# Reflection

- 1 What kinds of things do you think make up a piece of land's natural history?
- 2 What kinds of things do you think make up a piece of land's social history?

To find out about how White American settlers used the land, Dr. Edwards went to the library, visited museums and county government offices, and talked to people who were told by their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents about life in Jones County. Dr. Edwards also used photographs to help him understand how the land was changed over the years. In all these different ways Dr. Edwards was able to gather a wealth of information on land use in Jones County.

## Results

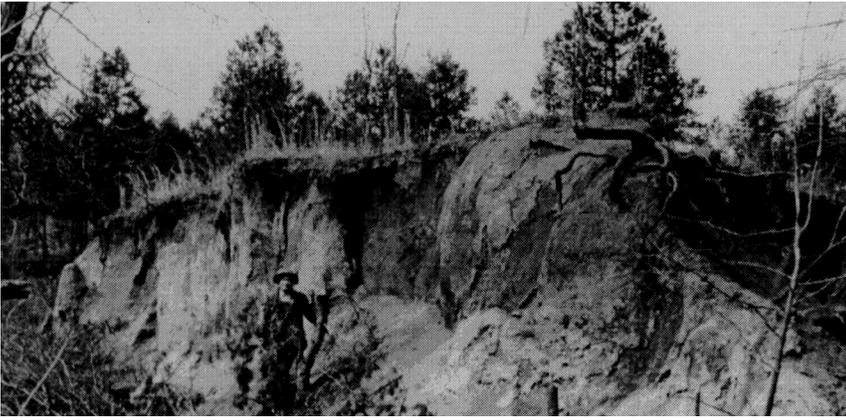
Dr. Edwards discovered that the American Indians did not change the land very much, even though they did use it and they did make some changes. White settlers had a much bigger impact on the land, and because the land was good for farming, most of the forest in Jones County was cut down for raising crops. In the early 1800's, cotton plantations brought prosperity to White farmers. After the Civil War, farming changed considerably and almost everyone was forced to start over. At this time, much of the forests in Jones County began to grow

again. In the 1920's, the remaining cotton crops were killed by the boll weevil (Figure 2). Forestry became important as forests began to replace cotton fields.

Because of the intensive farming that occurred in Jones County, much of the once-rich topsoil had been *eroded* (Figure 3). Landowners worked with government scientists, including scientists from the United States Forest Service, to restore the land's health. After World War II, people moved from rural areas to cities, and even more of Jones County became forested again. [Now do the Reflection Questions above]

Today, 87% of the land is forested.

Dr. Edwards believes that we can do a better job of protecting the land's health and *productivity* in the future if we understand its *natural* and *social history*. He hopes that we will not only think about our uses of the land today, but that an understanding of *land use* history will help us to think about protecting the land for future generations.



**Figure 3.** Land after it has been used for crops. Notice how much the soil has eroded. With all the top soil depleted (used up), much work will be required before this land can be farmed again.

## Reflection

- 1 How does knowing the history of your own family—where you used to live and now live, knowing your sisters and brothers and family over the years—help you to understand who you are today?
- 2 If you wanted to find out what the land was like before your own house and yard were there, where would you go to find the information or whom would you ask?
- 3 What kind of natural and social changes might be caused by building a new elementary school on a piece of forest land?
- 4 In what ways can students and teachers help protect the health of the land surrounding a school?

## **Further Discovery**

It is now the year 2020 (How old are you now?)

In small groups, pretend you are writing the land use history of the land surrounding your school. What kind of physical and social changes have taken place since the current year?

Discuss the land use history your group has written with the whole class. What are the similarities and differences in your histories? Use the space below to describe the changes in words and drawings.